

Teachings of Baha Ullah

It was Baha Ullah who gave shape to the teachings of the new faith. Social and religious reform went hand in hand, and gave inspiration to a worldwide movement which was to help usher in a new age of peace. Baha Ullah considered that divine revelation had been vouchsafed to the great religious figures of

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the world's history—to Christ, to the Buddha, to Krishna, to Moses, to Zarathustra, and, of course, to Muhammad. This revelation was essentially monotheistic. But the Qur'an held pride of place among the sacred writings of the world after the writings of the Bab and of Baha Ullah. In short, though this was to be a world faith, it had positive roots in Islam. Yet Baha Ullah did not accept a traditional account of Islam. He rejected polygamy, slavery, and the concept of holy war (jihad). Like the Bab, he was strongly in favor of equality between the sexes.

Bahai Ritual

At the religious level, ritual practices of the Bahai were simplified: prayer and devotional meditation were the core of religious activity, together with the pursuit of virtue. Much of the Qur'anic teaching was modified or explained in an allegorical or metaphorical sense. Thus belief in angels and evil spirits was dropped. Heaven and hell were treated symbolically. In these and other ways the monotheism of Muhammad was liberated from the particular thoughtforms and regulations natural at the time of the Prophet, and were given a new look. This faith could be accepted by rational and pious men of all nations. Moreover, it had a political message that was not confined to Islam. It was a political vision of a world community united under a federal world government. The Bahais also advocated a world language as a means of promoting human unity.

Bahaism was an interesting offshoot of Islam, for it embraced modernism and yet had its origins in a messianic movement. Its social platform gave it a strong appeal to the underprivileged, but at the same time its emphasis on education and the reconciliation of science and religion gave it an appeal to the educated. But from the Muslim point of view it sacrificed too much in pursuit of these objectives. The Qur'an's status was in effect lowered. No longer was Islamic brotherhood prized as such. In its syncretism it went beyond the creed "There is no god but Allah, and Muhammad is his Prophet." It therefore became a new faith, outside the stream of Islam where it had its origin.

Baha Ullah, in assigning to himself a messianic role, had been able to draw on reserves of religious expectation created and maintained by the Shia belief in the hidden Imam. It was natural in a period when all was not well in the Islamic community that the expectations of the people should become fervid. As illustration, in relatively recent times there were two uprisings of a military nature under the Mahdis—one in the Sudan which culminated in the battle of Omdurman, and the other in Somaliland. In the changing conditions of the modern world this fervidness has been manifested in a slightly different way.

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